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Multiple Intelligences in the Gospel Classroom

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In a worldwide training broadcast, Elder W. Rolfe Kerr taught, “We cannot expect our students to learn all that we hope they will learn by just hearing a concept or principle one time. Multiple presentations, utilizing various approaches, often appealing to multiple senses, increase the likelihood of our students actually learning and internalizing the concepts we teach.”¹

Using variety and finding different ways to present material have long been established as valuable pedagogical practices. In 1920 Elder John A. Widtsoe observed that the temple ceremony utilizes several different teaching approaches:

The wonderful pedagogy of the temple service, especially appealing to me as a professional teacher, carries with it evidence of the truth of temple work. We go to the temple to be informed and directed, to be built up and to be blessed. How is all this accomplished? First by the spoken word, through lectures and conversations, just as we do in the class room, except with more elaborate care, then by the appeal to the eye by representations by living, moving beings; and by pictorial representations. . . . Meanwhile, the recipients themselves, the candidates for blessings, engage actively in the temple service as they move from room to room, with the progress of the course of instruction. Altogether our temple worship follows a most excellent

pedagogical system. *I wish instruction were given so well in every school room throughout the land, for we would then teach with more effect than we now do.*²

Educational research has also shown that tapping into multiple senses is more than just a good idea. Using multiple means of presentation increases the likelihood that students will be able to learn in ways that are meaningful to them. In fact, people may have different types of intelligences, and pedagogical approaches that appeal to their intelligence will allow them to learn better. Dr. Howard Gardner, a professor of education at Harvard University, propounded the theory of multiple intelligences (MI), which describes specific intelligences, or ways that students learn. This paper addresses how religious educators can use MI in their classrooms to increase student learning. I will first explain the basic concept of MI and then examine different ways the theory could be applied in the classroom.

The Theory of Multiple Intelligences

The central tenet of MI is that people have different types of intelligences. If educators utilize their students' strongest intelligences, students will learn better. This theory has important implications for the way the mind and brain work as well as the way in which people frame their learning. By understanding the different intelligences, religious educators can use a variety of intelligences and also personalize their pedagogy for individual students. Gardner has identified the following intelligences:

“Linguistic intelligence involves sensitivity to spoken and written language, the ability to learn languages, and the capacity to use language to accomplish certain goals.”³

“Logical-mathematical intelligence involves the capacity to analyze problems logically, carry out mathematical operations, and investigate issues scientifically.”⁴

“Musical intelligence entails skill in the performance, composition, and appreciation of musical patterns.”⁵

“Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence entails the potential of using one's whole body or parts of the body (like the hand or the mouth) to solve problems or fashion products.”⁶

“Spatial intelligence features the potential to recognize and manipulate the patterns of wide space (those used, for instance, by navigators and pilots) as well as the patterns of more confined areas (such as those of importance to sculptors, surgeons, chess players, graphic artists, or architects).”⁷

“Interpersonal intelligence denotes a person's capacity to understand the intentions, motivations and desires of other people and, consequently, to work effectively with others.”⁸

“Intrapersonal intelligence involves the capacity to understand oneself, to have an effective working model of oneself—including one's own desires, fears, and capacities—and to use such information effectively in regulating one's own life.”⁹

Naturalist intelligence includes abilities within the natural world, such as classifying various species or working well with animals.¹⁰

Each individual may have a unique blend of these intelligences. The purpose of the MI is not to label students as “linguistically smart” or “interpersonally challenged”; rather, the theory can help teachers recognize that there are multiple ways of learning. When teachers utilize a variety of approaches, they will be more successful in helping their students learn and become converted.

Using Multiple Intelligences as Entry Points

Using a variety of intelligences can be challenging when teaching the scriptures. Because much of scripture study is a literary activity involving the written word, the use of linguistic methods tends to dominate classroom pedagogy. A simple way that teachers can apply MI is to use a variety of intelligences as entry points into the lesson material. For example, if a teacher was going to teach Daniel 1, the following entry points could be used. Although each of the following ideas involve linguistic intelligence, notice how they also involve a different intelligence, which can help spark a student's ability to pay attention and relate to the material being studied.

Linguistic intelligence. Students write a case study in which they show how people in modern society could be in situations in which they are pressured to break the Word of Wisdom. They then silently read Daniel 1:8–16 to see how Daniel refused to partake of harmful substances.

Logical-mathematical intelligence. The teacher writes the following statements on the board: “Resist peer pressure.” “Blessed for obedience.” “Make a personal commitment to obey.” Students are invited to put these statements in the order that seems most logical to them. Read Daniel 1:8–16 and look for the order in which these elements appear in Daniel's experience.

Musical intelligence. Students sing the hymn “In Our Lovely Deseret” and then read Daniel 1:8 to look for how this verse could relate to the hymn that was just sung.

Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence. Students are each given a handful of “pulse” to eat (Daniel 1:12). They then read Daniel 1:15 and look for what happened to those who ate pulse.

Spatial intelligence. As the teacher slowly reads Daniel 1:8–16 out loud, students draw a picture that describes the story being read. After reading the verses, the teacher shows the picture of Daniel 1 from the Gospel Art Picture Kit and asks students to compare it to how they depicted the story.

Interpersonal intelligence. Students are put into small groups and asked to come up with a role-play situation in which two people are pressuring another person to violate the Word of Wisdom. After one or two groups perform, read Daniel 1:8 and look for how Daniel avoided peer pressure.

Intrapersonal intelligence. Ask students to ponder a time in which they have refused to give in to peer pressure. Have students mark the phrase “purposed in his heart” (Daniel 1:8) and invite them to think about decisions that *they* have purposed in *their* hearts.

Natural intelligence. Ask students what they have observed when animals eat different types of food. Are some types of food better for animals than others? Use the experience they have had with animals as a springboard to explain why Daniel refused to eat certain kinds of food.

Even though each of these activities will lead into the use of the linguistic intelligence, utilizing different intelligences as entry points could invigorate students’ ability to engage in the material being taught. Similar examples could be given for any block of scripture. Many teachers have found that creating entry points based on the different intelligences stimulates their creativity and often leads them to methodologies that they would have otherwise not considered.

Using Multiple Intelligences throughout a Semester

Another way teachers can apply MI in a classroom is to keep track of which intelligences they use in individual lessons. Though teachers will probably not utilize all nine intelligences in each lesson, ideally they could draw on two or three. By keeping a record of which intelligences they use each day, educators can measure whether there are some intelligences they are neglecting and make necessary adjustments.

If teachers consistently draw on a particular intelligence in their teaching, they may be focusing on *their* strongest intelligence. For example, one teacher reported that every time he planned a lesson, nearly all of his ideas for lesson activities were linguistically based. He wanted the students to write a case

study, to respond to questions, and to read various texts. This is the way *he* likes to learn. Understanding MI has helped him try not to overprivilege his strongest intelligence. Because he recognized that his preferred learning style may not be his students’, he was able to set aside some of his linguistic lesson ideas and think about how the same concepts could be taught in ways that appeal to other intelligences.

Some teachers have found that using a chart is helpful in keeping track of the intelligences and specific techniques that they utilize. Such a chart might look like the one below.

Linguistic	Times used
Rewrite a verse in your own words.	
Create rhyming phrases to help remember key scriptures or concepts.	
Give a brief talk on a scriptural topic.	
Use a scriptural story to write a response to a “Dear Abby”-style question.	
Summarize a scripture story in a sentence.	
Logical-mathematical	
Turn a verse into an “if-then” statement.	
Place verses into categories (In which verses is Nephi sad? In which does he rejoice?).	
Create a numbered list of commandments given or blessings received from a specific scripture block.	
Create a time line to organize events.	
Musical	
Listen to a song that relates to the scripture block.	
Put a verse to the music of a hymn and sing it together.	
Select a hymn that connects with the topic of the scripture block.	
Connect a modern song with what is being taught in the scriptures.	
Bodily-kinesthetic	
Do a physical performance that connects to the block (e.g., braid a rope in John 2).	
Perform charades to illustrate a principle from the scriptures.	
Use finger gestures to learn (e.g., the Ten Commandments can be learned using finger motions).	
Clap when a certain word is repeated in the scripture.	
Physical action as a readiness (e.g., thumb wrestle your neighbor, talk about thumb war strategy, turn to Alma 48).	

Spatial	
Draw or examine maps.	
Show a short video clip.	
Compare paintings of scripture with the actual account.	
Draw what you see in the scriptures (e.g., what would it look like to “shake at the very appearance of sin?”).	
Interpersonal	
Role-play (e.g., missionary-investigator, active friend-less-active friend, leader-youth, etc.).	
Brainstorm as a group.	
Share scripture insights with a partner.	
Intrapersonal	
Ponder an experience that you have had that relates to the scripture block.	
Set a personal goal.	
Give students a choice of which activity they prefer to do.	
Think about what in the class today was most meaningful to you personally.	
Natural	
Create nature-based analogies (e.g., what is something in nature that could be likened to repentance?).	
Pick an animal that you think best represents something from the scripture block (e.g., a scriptural character).	
Explain how things in nature could testify of Christ.	

Awareness that students have different intelligences can encourage a broadening of the lesson activities used in class. As teachers recognize their students’ favored ways of learning, teachers will be better able to provide their students with the instruction they need.

Using Multiple Intelligences to Allow Students to Choose

Part of the educational power of MI is that it helps teachers recognize that students may have diverse ways of learning and that teachers can greatly facilitate the students’ learning by providing opportunities for students to utilize the intelligences with which they feel most comfortable.

When possible, teachers may want to provide students with a variety of options to choose from in completing assignments that will allow them to tap into the intelligence of their choice. For example, one teacher created a

final project assignment for his seminary students to complete. This assignment could take several different forms—a research paper, a collage, a musical number, or any significant project that was meaningful to the student. This project also had to be high quality and was graded on how likely it was that the student would keep and use it in his or her daily life.

Because students were given flexibility in the type of project they did, they had the opportunity to learn in a way which was most powerful for them. Some students who would have struggled to write a report composed beautiful visual or musical pieces, creating something through an intelligence that was more meaningful to them. This same method of providing choices could be used in smaller projects as well.

Conclusion

The *Teaching the Gospel* handbook states, “Part of human nature is the desire for variety and change. When students complain about classes being boring, part of what they often mean is sameness. Even a persuasive teaching technique may become boring if overused.”¹¹

MI can help teachers use more variety in their classroom by using it as framework of how to teach in different ways. This can be done using the different intelligences as entry points and throughout the semester. Perhaps even more significantly, the use of MI theory can help students utilize ways of learning that are personally meaningful, and thereby increase the benefit they gain from the classroom experience. **RE**

Notes

1. W. Rolfe Kerr, “The Heart and a Willing Mind,” CES satellite broadcast, August 7, 2007.
2. John A. Widtsoe, “Temple Worship,” *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine*, April 1921, 59; emphasis added.
3. Howard Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 41.
4. Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed*, 42.
5. Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed*, 42.
6. Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed*, 42.
7. Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed*, 42.
8. Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed*, 43.
9. Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed*, 43.
10. Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed*, 48.
11. *Teaching the Gospel: A Handbook for CES Teachers and Leaders* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2001), 23.